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Report by Chullaine O'Reilly
on Boston University's Proposal
to Train Personnel in the
Afghan News Agency

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Problems Confronting Boston University

A careful review of the material related to Boston University's plan to formulate an Afghan news agency has revealed some areas of concern which I believe need special consideration.

The Pakistani Government

I foresee two types of problems arising with the Pakistani government, namely, the Pakistani's reaction to the Boston University program and the more complex problem of Pakistani/Afghani relations and how these relations will indirectly affect the outcome of the A.N.A.

The current Pakistani government expects local journalists to police their own actions. While the government does not have a hand in direct censorship, the press in Pakistan is generally seen as an extension of official government policy. Objections do exist and are printed, but not with any frequency.

Foreign journalists are required to make their headquarters in the capital of Islamabad. I do not find it surprising then that the Pakistanis have asked Boston University to confine their activities to the capital as well.

I have been reassured that Boston University and not the Pakistani government will be in charge of the A.N.A. program. I believe that this decision is non-negotiable if the program is to be a success.

It would prove advantageous to adopt a policy of mutual "friendly control" with the Pakistanis. They are in control of the country, Boston University is in control of the classroom, and both parties remain friendly.

I think it is wise to remember that the government of Pakistan is currently very uneasy. They have two unfriendly nations, the Soviet Union and India, on their borders, plus internal problems with Benazar Bhutto.

In addition, and in direct relation to the Boston University program, the Pakistani government is deeply suspicious of the Afghan mujahadeen.

In order to understand this situation we need to look at the recent history of Afghan/Pakistan relations. The most important single factor to be considered is the Pathans.

The Emergence of Pakistan

However, in 1947, when the British prepared to leave India forever, the Afghan government put forth a claim to these southern Pathan tribesmen and the land they owned.

Kabul argued that because these Pathans were historically and ethnically related to Afghanistan, they should revert to Afghan rule when the British departed. Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, implied that he was in agreement. But after he came to power in Pakistan, he declined to discuss the matter further with Kabul.

The Afghans were outraged. Consequently, in 1948 they were the only country to vote against admitting Pakistan into the United Nations. The two countries have been at odds ever since.

In the 1960s, Afghan Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud called upon all Pakistani Pathans to rebel against Islamabad. He urged them to join their Afghan brothers in starting a new Afghan province known as Pushtoonistan.

This anti-Pakistani attitude was one of the main reasons the United States government refused to help restructure and rearm the Afghan army, a decision which ultimately helped lead to the downfall of the country.

The government of Pakistan, therefore, has taken a very dim view of their Afghan neighbors since 1947. Consequently, when the Soviets invaded, the very Pathans who had earlier been calling for a revolt in Pakistan found themselves seeking refuge there.

General Zia

General Zia, the military ruler of Pakistan, thus found himself with a problem. He had launched his government on the premise of a return to Islamic values. One of the sacred responsibilities of all Moslems is to extend hospitality to a stranger, especially an Islamic brother in need.

As we know, Zia ended up extending hospitality to over four million Afghan refugees, many of whom are the same Pathans which had been calling

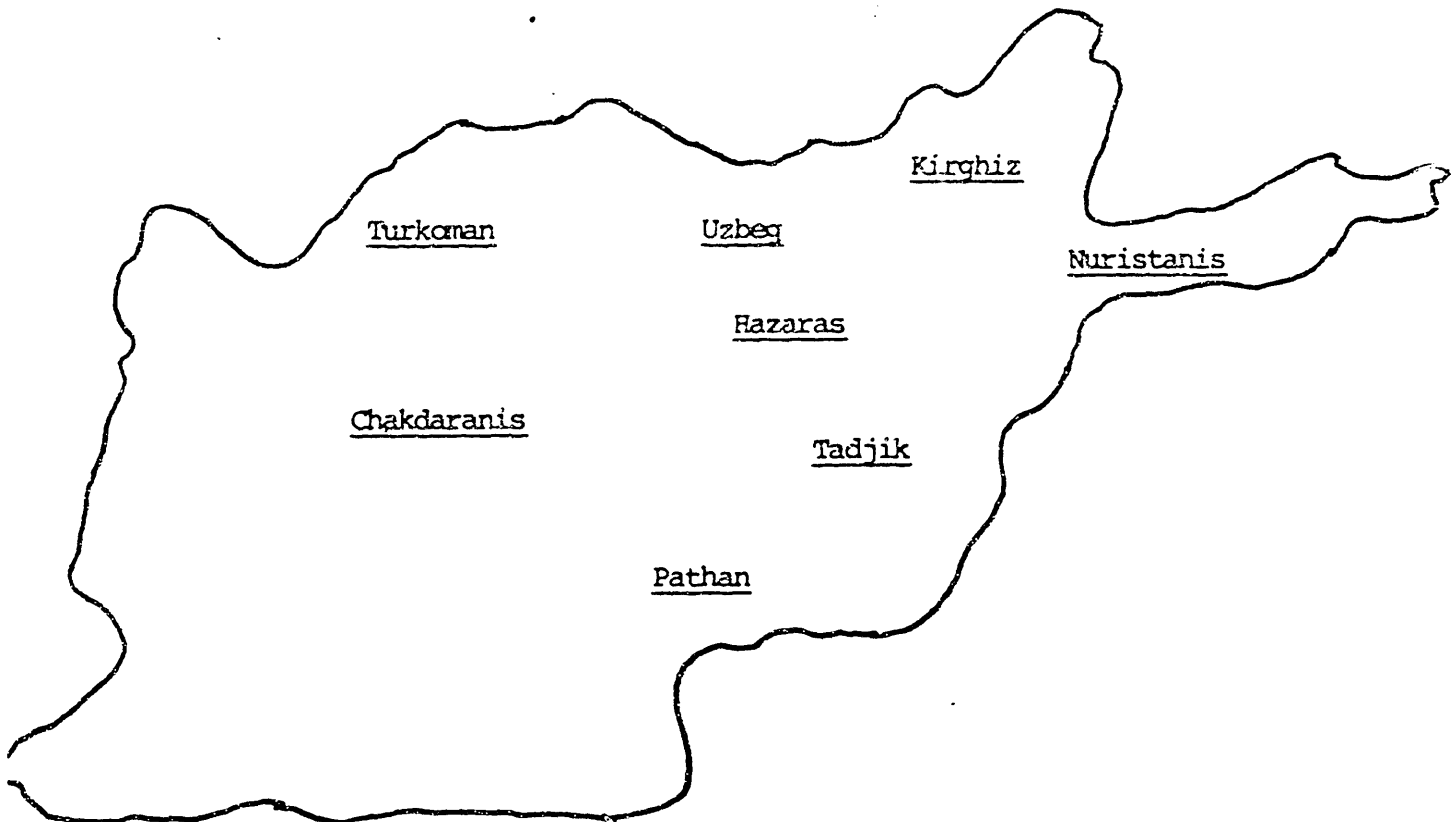
earlier for a free Pushtoonistan. Zia thus found himself with the Russian bear on his back and the Afghan wolf cub in his shirt.

It should not be surprising therefore that the Pakistanis have tried to help the Afghan refugees, while maintaining a firm, if discreet, control over them.

With this little bit of history regarding Pakistan/Afghan relations in mind, let us reexamine some of the problems confronting the Boston University program. The first point with which I disagree is the choice of Pushto, the language of the Pathans, as the language of the classroom.

Pushto

There are, I believe, three very strong reasons not to use Pushto in the Boston University classroom. The first consideration is that all Afghans are not Pathans. This rather crude map will show the location of the other seven major ethnic groups in Afghanistan.



Even though Afghanistan has always maintained a rather rocky relationship with Persia, the accepted national language of Afghanistan has always been Farci, a rather archaic form of classical Persian. And while the rulers of Afghanistan have generally been Pathan, the language of the Afghan has always been Farci, not Pushto.

An obvious consideration of Boston University then should be that far more Afghans speak Farci than they do Pushto. The language of the Pathans is spoken mainly in tribal territory, while Farci speakers can be found throughout the entire country.

Choosing Farci for the classroom will also demonstrate that Boston University has an understanding of the culture and history of all the Afghan people. Plus, it will dispel any unplanned favoritism towards Pathans in the class.

To favor the Pathans in such a small way might seem immaterial, but please recall that other Afghans might resent it and the Pakistanis might fear it.

I believe one of the easiest ways for Boston University to dispel Pakistani fears is to keep the threat of Pathan nationalism to a minimum. Thus, it is vital to the program that Pushto, Pushtoonistan, and any other sort of Pathan favoritism be underplayed.

The third and last consideration regarding Pushto is the difficult nature of the language itself. It is an incredibly harsh and guttural language that, according to Afghan legend, was invented by King Solomon so that he could speak to the devils in hell.

My experience has taught me that Farci is a graceful and eloquent language that most foreigners — in this case the Boston University trainers — could pick up easily.

Other Ethnic Considerations

The question of language has brought up the different ethnic groups in Afghanistan. With the exception of the Kirghiz, who have migrated to Turkey, the remaining seven ethnic Afghan groups are generally still represented in their homelands and in the nearby refugee camps.

As I have previously said, I believe that the Boston University program will have a greater chance of success if it makes an effort to enroll students from as many of these ethnic groups as possible.

This will not only help put Pakistani fears regarding the Pathans to rest but, more importantly to Boston University and the A.N.A., it will provide newly-trained journalists who will have a desire to report on their own part of Afghanistan.

Because of the close proximity of the Pathan territory to Peshawar, Pakistan, most Western journalists have unknowingly reported almost exclusively on Pathan-related affairs for the past seven years. Most reporters have filed stories from Kandahar, Kabul, Jalalabad and Ghazni, all of which are in Pathan territory.

This has left an incredible news vacuum regarding the rest of Afghanistan, and left the activities of the other Afghans sadly unreported.

One should recall that Afghanistan is still deeply divided down tribal lines. While I do not think it is impossible, I think it will be unlikely that Pathans, for example, will be willing to travel and report on the Turkoman territory in the northwest.

By enrolling a wide spectrum of students, the A.N.A. will have a particular interest in getting their story told. In addition, each group will be able to file stories on subjects which may be indicative of that particular ethnic group. A Turkoman could write about the decline of Buz Khazi, for example.

Women Reporters

The subject of what types of students to enroll brings me to another consideration which I believe would be of benefit to the A.N.A. program — namely, enrolling at least one female student in each class.

Before my arrival in Boston, I made a special trip outside Seattle to visit an Afghan refugee family. Both the husband and wife are University of Kabul graduates. But, more importantly, the wife has not worn the veil for years. She was previously employed in several embassies prior to the Soviet invasion. They both agreed that it would be advisable to enroll at least one woman per class.

Many Westerners are under the impression that Afghan women are still required to wear the veil in public. This law was struck down by King Zahir Shah in the late 1950s. The role of Afghan women was increasing dramatically when the Soviets invaded.

By having one or possibly two women reporters, the A.N.A. would be able to file stories that are currently going unreported. The current plight of Afghan women in the refugee camps, for example, is completely unreported. Even using women as sources or taking their pictures is hardly being done at all because of the Afghan tradition which does not allow a strange male to look upon the women of a household.

While the segregation of sexes is still widespread in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, there are women who are breaking this traditional barrier.

I believe that if the matter of women reporters is handled with discretion and sensitivity, women with the proper qualifications could be found to help the A.N.A.

One last thing I might add as to student selection: I believe that if the class disintegrates into tribal or political factions, the program may be lost.

I think it is vital to the success of the A.N.A. program that properly qualified candidates be selected. And I am not speaking about their English skills alone. It is very important that Boston University enroll students who can abandon jingoism for objectivity.

Curriculum

The discussion of prospective students brings me to the subject of curriculum. According to Mr. Mills, a day-to-day, in-depth course description for the journalistic portion of the A.N.A. program has not been developed yet.

My short stay in Boston does not allow me to draw up such a plan during this trip; however, I do have a few suggestions.

The first suggestion is to recall that most Afghans literally stepped out of the nineteenth century and into the 1980s after the Soviets invaded. I believe it is imperative that the Boston University trainers take this for granted.

To illustrate this point I need only recall the young Afghani man I met in Peshawar in 1983. Upon entering a conversation with him, I discovered that he was unaware of the theory of gravity and did not know that the earth revolved around the sun. Not surprisingly, he considered it impossible for men to have walked on the moon.

While I am not suggesting that future A.N.A. reporters will be recruited from such ignorant rustics, I think it is important for Boston University trainers to keep in mind the overwhelming illiteracy of most Afghans.

The existence of such a situation leads me to stress the fact that, in my opinion, the A.N.A. will have the greatest chance of success if the program stresses accuracy, objectivity, and basic reporting skills. In-depth theory and advanced techniques will only confuse most Afghans.

Beginning classes should cover the 5 Ws, inverted pyramid, leads and headlines. Intermediate classes could discuss the mechanics of journalism, i.e., punctuation, paragraphs, etc. in addition to what beginning Afghan journalists should avoid, i.e., cliches, doctored quotes, use of phony numbers, etc.

Reporting skills should be taught throughout. And I believe it would be helpful if writing exercises were conducted using local examples -- for instance, camels instead of Cadillacs.

The Enshallah Factor

The last subject which I believe Boston University needs to consider is what I call the Enshallah Factor. Enshallah is an Arabic word which translates into, "If Allah wills it." Most Moslems in Afghanistan and Pakistan will start and finish any expression of desire with the word, 'enshallah.'

For example, "Enshallah, the Boston University program will succeed."

I use this word to help show the all-pervasive nature of Islam in the Afghan situation. Boston University trainers should try to keep in mind that Islam is the force which shapes the majority of Afghanis' lives. Because of this, I believe it is important that they should show a sensitivity toward the people's religion.

The trainers can use Islam to their advantage as well. The students, for example, can be urged to see themselves as Moslem brothers, not as Tadjiks, Hazaras, etc. In addition, any dealings with the Pakistani government should be undertaken with a thought towards Islam.

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